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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 SANTO DOMINGO 000668

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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN ELECTIONS #20: HURRAH FOR HIPOLITO

REF: SANTO DOMINGO 0630

11. (SBU) Following is no. 20 in our Dominican presidential election series:

HURRAH FOR HIPOLITO, THE PRD CANDIDATE

As expected, President Hipolito Mejia was acclaimed as the PRD's presidential candidate by thousands of delegates and government employees reportedly bused in at the party's official "Twentieth Extraordinary Assembly" on January 31. None of the other PRD presidential contenders participated. Chaired by former president (1982-86) Salvador Jorge Blanco, the assembly removed outspoken anti-reelectionist PRD party president Hatuey De Camps and replaced him with Director General of Customs Vicente Sanchez Baret, a Mejia loyalist, until November, when a permanent official would normally be chosen. Tourism Minister Rafael "Fello" Subervi, although absent from the assembly, was allowed to retain his post as PRD secretary general. No vice presidential candidate was announced, so some speculate "Fello" is in the running. (He denies it.)

The latest advance in the President's determined drive for re-election drew fire from various quarters. Cardinal Archbishop Nicolas de Jesus Lopez Rodriguez admonished the public at a Youth Day mass the same day that "Mejia's re-election bid in no way benefits the Dominican people and is going to weigh heavily on the President, his family, and the country."

Mejia's main opponents in the PRD were acerbic. Subervi said that the assembly's decision would make permanent the split in the party, and Vice President Milagros Ortiz-Bosch in a long, eloquent written apologia in local papers lamented the "high cost I have paid." Ousted party president De Camps declared the assembly "a farce" and threatened to challenge its legality before the Supreme Court. At the opening baseball game of the four-nation Caribbean Series on February 1, the capacity crowd in Quisqueya Stadium could be heard on television booing President Mejia as he tossed the first pitch.

Meanwhile, Mejia's PPH faction continued to push the "law of slogans" electoral law revision through Congress -- the next maneuver in his strategy to ensure that he gets to the second round of the elections to confront current front runner Leonel Fernandez (PLD). Following the first favorable Senate vote January 29, a committee of senators was set to meet with the Central Election Board (JCE) on February 2 to gather information on the practical difficulties of implementing such a legal change so close to the May 16 first round. Mejia's steamroller should get final approval by the PRD/PPH's crushing majority in the Senate, but will encounter rougher terrain in the Chamber of Deputies, where the PRD has less than a majority. JCE Elections Director Gilberto Cruz Erasme told us February 2 that the bill, if passed, would be "extremely disruptive" to preparations for the election, which at present are on track and on schedule. A cabinet member confirmed to the Ambassador and DCM on February 2 that Mejia would submit the law, if passed, to the Supreme Court for a call on its constitutionality.

The PRD delegates' assembly is aimed at giving the President his first boost and his initial momentum. But the road is a long and steep one. Mejia will be counting on the PRD's structure as a party of the masses to get this campaign goin